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Soviet Defense Minister Yevgeny Shaposhnikov Interviewed

FRANK SESNO: And now a CNN Special. CNN has talked with the new Soviet Defense Minister, Yevgeny Shaposhnikov. The question is: what happens to the Soviet military machine now: four million men and women under arms, 30,000 nuclear warheads?

Our military affairs correspondent Wolf Blitzer conducted the interview in Moscow just hours ago. Here it is in its entirety.

[General Shaposhnikov's remarks are translated.]

WOLF BLITZER: Minister Shaposhnikov, thank you very much for joining us on CNN. We're grateful for the time you're taking.

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: Thank you.

BLITZER: Many people in the world have been concerned about the security of the Soviet nuclear arsenal. Is there reason for this concern, since the coup, right now?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: The causes for concern always

exist when such developments take place in the country, especially for those people who are not aware of the controls we have over the nuclear potential and nuclear weapons as a whole. We have a system which enabled us, even at those tragic days, to prevent the unauthorized use of nuclear weapons, if somebody wanted to do that.

At present, there are no grounds for concern, and the international community should rest assured that everything's fine.

BLITZER: Who is in control right now? What is the chain of command for control of the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: I can say that it's myself and the Chief of the General Staff. There are several other systems of control. And this is sufficient for the purposes of our televised interview, especially since I'm not asking questions about the system of control in other countries.

BLITZER: Some people have suggested that there should be some talks between the Soviet Union, the United States, perhaps other countries, to insure future nuclear security. Do you think there is room for these kinds of negotiations, discussions?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: I believe that time will come when we will reach the frontiers of understanding and we will hold such negotiations. I'm not opposed to them.

BLITZER: Do you think that will be soon?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: This does not depend on me. As regards my personal opinion, I believe that this may happen in the foreseeable future.

BLITZER: Are you fully as confident in the security of the tactical nuclear weapons, as opposed to the big strategic nuclear weapons?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: Yes. When I am speaking about nuclear weapons, I mean both tactical and strategic weapons, although there are certain nuances involved in tactical nuclear weapons.

BLITZER: Any danger that criminals or terrorists could take one of these smaller tactical nuclear weapons?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: No. This is excluded. We have adequate protection, and technical protection as well.

BLITZER: Have you removed all of the smaller tactical nuclear weapons from the other republics outside of Russia?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: You are very inquisitive. And let me say this. We have removed all nuclear weapons from other European countries, and we are dealing with the rest of the matters involved.

BLITZER: No more nuclear weapons left in Germany?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: Not a single nuclear charge in Germany. I mean those made in Russia. And this is what we've talked about; with the German Ambassador here in Moscow. We

discussed everything in great detail. And I assured him and I reaffirmed my assurances -- I mean the commander of the Western group of troops, Bulakov (?), reaffirmed my assurances.

BLITZER: Final question on this subject, on the nuclear subject. During the coup, when the briefcase that President Gorbachev had, on the codes, the key to the nuclear arsenal, was taken by the coup plotters, was there a real danger to the security of the Soviet nuclear arsenal during those three tense days?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: No, there was no danger of that kind. Because, apart from that briefcase, we have other briefcases and there are other people who are sober-minded.

BLITZER: Did you do anything to signal to the United States that you had -- there was no problem, as far as the nuclear weapons were concerned, during those three days?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: Personally, I did not take any steps at that time. No one asked any question of that kind of me. And I'm confident of what I'm saying today here with you.

BLITZER: What was the role of the military, in your opinion, during the coup?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: Both the military and the civilian population played a positive role, because the plotters had not expected that our people and our Army had changed. And when people say that it was a military coup, this is something I don't accept. I don't accept that definition. It was a coup

d'etat or a conspiracy. I think this is a much more precise definition, because the military did not overthrow any regime; and the Army has preserved its dignity, it has preserved its authority, and it has remained loyal to the President, the oath, and its home country.

BLITZER: During those three days, did you receive any orders to do anything in support of the coup, you personally? You were Commander of the Air Force.

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: Yes, it is true. And yes, I did receive orders that I should support the State Committee for the State of Emergency, that an increased alert should be introduced. And I also gave similar orders, but not to support this State Committee for the State of Emergency. Those were orders designed to maintain order and to insure that the Air Force was not involved in any actions against the civilian population.

BLITZER: Did you disobey any orders from the Defense Minister at that time?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: No. There were no specific orders that anything should be done. On the 19th, I was trying to find people who thought as I did, and we got in touch with the staff of President Yeltsin's office. We kept in close contact, mutually informing each other. And on the 20th, when I had failed to find people who thought likewise who were close to Yazov, I suggested that Yazov should find a way out of that situation. But Marshal Yazov did not want to continue that

conversation with me at that time, and he did not take any steps. And it is only on the 21st, when the meeting of the military collegium was held, I spoke at the meeting of the collegium. And on the 19th, we talked eye-to-eye. And then again I reaffirmed my statement that before the Parliament of the Russian Federation was convened, it was necessary to pull the troops from the streets of the city, to proclaim the State Committee illegal, and to maintain the prestige of the armed forces.

After that, the members of the collegium supported me. And Yazov promised to convey our opinion to the State Committee, and he said that appropriate orders would be given.

On the 21st, it is not clear what actually happened, because information was slow in coming. It was slow. And it was only on the afternoon an official statement was published. Because when we took that decision at -- when an appropriate decision was taken by the State committee, they also envisioned appropriate steps to be taken.

BLITZER: What about Marshal Akhromeyev? Was he involved? Did he support the coup?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: This is difficult for me to say anything about Marshal Akhromeyev. I can speak about Yazov, but I would not like to bring Akhromeyev in. The Investigation Department can pass judgment on the other people. But generally speaking, about his generation of people, I think I should say this: They were born in the 1920s. They emerged during the

times of the reaction launched by Stalin in this country. As young people, they fought for our ideals. And when perestroika was begun at the top, they supported it. But when it continued at the grass-roots level, they failed to understand it. And this explains the actions that they took and the disaster that they suffered, because they were out of touch with realities in the Army and in society.

BLITZER: You're part of the new generation, a new generation of Soviet military officers. You see things, obviously, differently. What is the major threat today facing the Soviet Union? Every military prepares for some sort of threat. What threat are you preparing for?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: I don't quite understand. You mean a threat to the Soviet Union?

BLITZER: Why is...

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: Or to the Soviet people, or Army, or what?

BLITZER: What is your major threat? Is it a threat from the United States, from Europe, from China, or from within the Soviet Union? What are you training for? Why does the Soviet Union have four or five million troops?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: Yes, I see.

Well, I'm not -- you don't have the correct figures. It's not five or four millions.

As regards the threat, I would say that there is no real

threat. But we must be on the lookout. We need not be complacent. I mean both us and the United States and the other countries of the world.

As to the number of troops in this country, I believe, taking into account the Vienna talks and taking into account the domestic needs and the specific situation outside the country, we will be able to reduce the number of troops.

What I want is to achieve a qualitatively new level of Army, and many detachments in the Army have been understaffed. We need fewer units, but at full strength.

Well, it is better to be thin and healthy, rather than fat and in bad health, if you permit this kind of joke.

BLITZER: Well, how many troops are there today in the Soviet military?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: A little bit over three million.

BLITZER: As you know, the Pentagon suggests there are 4 1/2 million.

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: Well, this is up to the Pentagon, then.

BLITZER: Let me ask you about the all-volunteer military. The United States has abolished the draft. There's talk here of abolishing the draft. Are you in favor of that?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: At the present time in the Soviet Union, it would be difficult to do away with the draft, because it involves several factors: reserves, training, etcetera. We

need to preserve the draft for the time being, apart from -- we should make an exception for students, though. At the same time, I believe the term of service should be reduced from 24 months to 18 months. And then we should rely on the combined principle of drafting -- parts of the Army would be built on the basis of draft and part on contract basis.

BLITZER: How has the independence of the three Baltic states -- Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania -- affected the military? You'll be losing some bases there, some early-warning listening posts. What is the impact of the independence of these three states on the military?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: Now, you seem to be saying that we are talking about the independence of the Baltics, but at the same time we are losing bridgeheads in Baltics. It's the same as if we were losing bridgeheads in Germany.

Let me put it this way. We have reached agreement with the United States on mutual confidence and mutual reduction of strategic nuclear weapons. We have an agreement with Germany providing for the withdrawal of our troops from its territory. And for many decades, we had links between the Baltic states and the Soviet Union, and we will be able to take appropriate steps in respect of the troops stationed on the territory of the Baltic states.

BLITZER: Are you concerned about the potential independence movement in some of the other republics, the impact that

that could have on the military situation here?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: Speaking about the other republics, I'm less concerned, because at the present time we have developed the concept of the unity of the armed forces, irrespective of the future shape of the union or the country as a whole, whether it will be a federation or a confederation or any other structure which involves elements of an associative nature.

So, this concept of unified armed forces will be upheld. I'm currently in consultation with the leaders of the other republics, and we see eye-to-eye on these matters.

BLITZER: Should these other republics -- the Ukraine, Byelorussia -- have their own military operations in addition to what you command, their own separate, autonomous armies?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: Speaking about the unity of the armed forces, irrespective of the structure of power in this country, I believe that we cannot put in question the structure of the Army. What we can speak about is something like the National Guard, which can be used on orders from the government to provide protection for installations or dealing with domestic issues.

As regards the Army of the Union, its units and detachments on the territory of individual republics, the Army will not be involved in domestic matters. It will be used to protect the frontiers of the republics and the Union as a whole.

BLITZER: I suppose you would support reduced defense

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spending so that more of these valuable rubles could be used for civilian purposes, to reduce the percentage of your gross national product that goes to defense.

Two questions: What is the percentage of your GNP, or gross national product, that goes to defense? And secondly, how do you plan on this enormous task of converting defense industries for civilian purposes?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: Yes, I see.

Let me put it this way: I was appointed Defense Minister, and it is my duty to insure that we have a strong Army. And the structure of the military budget itself may change, but what I want is to channel the greatest part of this budget to increase salaries for the officers, and the combined principle of the buildup of the Army will permit to do just that. I don't believe that we should reduce the budget which is earmarked for research and development. But at the same time, I do think that it is possible that we can cut down on the purchases of equipment and military hardware.

BLITZER: Everybody agrees that you're cutting way down your conventional capability. But some experts, in the United States especially, suggest that you're not really cutting down your strategic development, intercontinental ballistic missiles, new strategic bombers.

Does the Soviet Union still need to spend so much money on these very expensive high-tech strategic weapons?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: I think that we do spend a lot of money. But on the other hand, we have an agreement with the United States regarding the numbers of these weapons in the Soviet Union and in the United States. In the future we will work closely together with the United States to resolve these matters.

At present, we have enough weapons to destroy the whole world. After the agreement on the reduction of weapons was signed, the situation has changed, but we can reduce the nuclear weapons still further. This will promote confidence.

We do have problems in that sphere, but gradually we'll sort them out.

BLITZER: The troops that are being demobilized, that are coming home from Eastern Europe, many of them don't have houses, jobs. What are you doing about this problem? Hundreds of thousands of troops are going to be deactivated in the coming months and years.

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: First of all, I think you know what we intend to do with those troops. It's difficult to deploy on the territory of this country. We need to provide accommodation for them and to see that they have everything they need. But then I believe we can find jobs for them, both in the military sphere or in the civilian sphere.

So, we have many concerns in that respect, but I don't want to put my problems on your shoulders.

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BLITZER: Minister Shaposhnikov, thank you very much. I have one final question before we end this interview. Is it time for the Soviet Union to end its military support of Cuba?

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: Cuba. It's a specific question. It is a political question rather than a military question. Although we do have something to talk about in this respect, I don't want to make any statements. I believe this is largely for politicians to deal with. Because you know that every military person is under political supervision.

We don't intend to supply arms to any country. What we want is to deal with all other countries of the world on a mutually satisfactory basis.

And as regards the United States, we will watch very closely what countries the United States will supply arms to.

So, we will deal successfully with these matters, I hope.

BLITZER: Minister Shaposhnikov, thank you very much for joining us. It's been a delight to be here in the Defense Ministry, and especially for your hospitality.

Congratulations.

GENERAL SHAPOSHNIKOV: I would like to avail myself of this opportunity and to express my confidence that our relations -- I mean the relations between the military leaders of our countries -- will continue, become more profound, and will be strengthened. And I would like to use this opportunity, I would

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like to convey my greetings to Mr. Cheney and Mr. Powell.

BLITZER: Thank you.